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BACK IN THE SADDLE AGAIN: RIDING THE CHROME-MOLY HORSE

by Lucille Enix



“I’ll never complain again,” he said in a voice so low it sounded more like a moan. “Now I know the real meaning of pain. I wasn’t sure I could get off that horse. I had so many saddle sores.”

As the cowboy continued describing his pain, the aftereffects of having ridden 150 miles in a two-day journey from Texas into Oklahoma, he never once mentioned that he’d been riding a chrome-moly horse. Chrome-moly? Yes, chrome-moly. I’m talking about today’s cowboy.

For those of you who bemoan the disappearance of the old cowboy, I say, they’re still here. They just ride a different kind of horse. My research into this phenomenon began two years ago. I



A chrome-moly cowboy

have since ridden over 5,000 miles of Texas back roads and streets with thousands of others astride chrome-moly mounts. It was here that I first discovered that today's cyclists are yesterday's cowboys. Hear me out before you protest.

As we near the end of this century in a society that now rewards conformity over individuality, individualists still find ways to retain their independence. At the turn of the century, many individualists found solitude in becoming cowboys. Others became explorers who set out on their horses to discover new territory. Both found particular pleasure in sharing an intimacy with the land, its people, and the abundance of nature. Today's fenced-in, paved-over environment inspires corporate farming and cattle raising. Ours is a place hostile to the horse and cowboy. I believe these same individualists have found the bicycle.

Now I'm going to give you some numbers. But I must warn you that the only accurate horseflesh numbers come from those compiled at the turn of the century. That's when statisticians, and other authority types, considered the horse an agricultural commodity. Today horses are no longer considered an agricultural commodity. Horses are considered recreational. Therefore, no one keeps tabs on the overall number of horses or horseback riders. Believe me. I've made telephone calls all across the country. Only horse breeders keep records of their horses.

Here are the best numbers I could get. In 1900, there were 17 million horses. The horse population equaled about half that of the United States. That same year, 1.1 million bicycles were manufactured.¹ Nearly one hundred years later, 83 million people (one-third of our population) ride bicycles.² And an estimated 4.9 million people ride horses.³ For every nostalgic cross-country trail ride that features horse-drawn wagons and drugstore cowboys, there are a dozen groups of bicycle riders pedaling their horses across the country. Another 3,500 chrome-moly cowboys will ride their mounts alone on roads and trails throughout the nation.⁴

There are so many parallels between riders of horses and bicycles that I think you'll find the similarities striking. For example, both riders call their mounts, horses. Both prefer to ride in the open

country, to create their own paths through the countryside and to cross the country at their own pace. Both have a keen awareness of their surroundings: the scent in the air, the wind, the lay of the land and especially the hills, temperature variations, and animal life, especially in the form of dogs. They both ride regardless of heat, rain, cold, or high winds. Both engage in a singular, lone activity. Both exhibit an independence not usually seen in others.

Both dread their common enemy: the automobile. The gear used on both mounts shares similar descriptive terms. Both mounts have a saddle, head, stirrups, and carry the rider's goods in saddlebags. Both mounts buck, must be steered from the head, and need to be groomed and put up properly for the night.

Both critters have different breeds. There are three basic chrome-moly mounts. The road mount could be compared to the quarter horse. Its more slender, high-pressure tires, curved handlebars, and finely-tuned brakes make it more sensitive to touch and ride. It corners rapidly, which sometimes spills its rider. The hybrid has a wider tire, straight handlebars, and a sturdy balance. The hybrid more resembles the cow pony, an everyday work horse that can travel on the road or in the open country. The mountain bike has a smaller wheel, with a fatter tire that has a knobby tread to help it grip the soil. It's probably a cousin to the mustang. Then there are the race horses, those specially bred horses. Hand-built racing bikes are created for such world class riders as Texan Lance Armstrong, who represents the United States in the Tour de France.

Riding a chrome-moly, in fact, is done in much the same way you ride a horse. When your mount starts bucking, you kinda stand up in the stirrups and move with it. If you don't, you can get thrown, just like a bronco rider. Chrome-moly riders, like cowboys of past years, love to sit around the campfire after a hard day's ride and swap stories of courage and extraordinary feats. Some of these stories tell of great escapes.

Remember the stories of all those young men in frontier days who ran away from home by sneaking a horse out of the barn in the dead of night, and riding away never to be found again? This still happens; only chrome-moly stories have a slightly different

twist. There is the story of the lone woman found by two cyclists as they crossed the Mojave Desert in their pickup. They had tied down their bikes in the truck's bed. As they neared the woman, they saw clothing flapping out of two shopping bags tied to the back of her bike. When they stopped to offer her a ride, she gratefully accepted. Then she told them that she had been on the road for a week, having taken her son's bicycle to run away from home. She had carefully planned her escape from a husband who had been beating her for years. She had, indeed, stolen away in the dead of night.

Yes, bicycle riders get saddle sores. That woman had plenty of them, plus severe sun and wind burn. She wore none of the peculiar gear chrome-moly riders wear to protect their bodies. Like the cowboys of old, cyclists must protect themselves from the elements. They wear those funny little pants to hold their muscles in place and to quickly disperse sweat. Their helmets can prevent severe head injuries should a crash occur. Gloves not only prevent blisters, but gel padding saves joints from damage caused by the rapid vibration from road surfaces.

Do cowboys find chrome-moly riders a bit strange, or do they recognize them as kindred souls? I think it's some of both. David Lamb, the national correspondent for the *Los Angeles Times*, tells the story of arriving in Dalhart, Texas, having ridden his bicycle cross-country from Washington, D.C., headed toward L.A. He recalled:

A group of cowboys in Stetsons, jeans and boots eyed me as I leaned my bike against the glass window of a cafe and walked in, feeling quite out of place with my short pants, helmet and sweat-stained jersey. I ordered coffee and a grilled cheese sandwich and, leaving my wallet and glasses on the table, went back outside to buy a newspaper.

"That's a pretty good way to get your money stole, wouldn't you say?" one of them drawled when I returned.

“Back in Washington, D.C., it is,” I said, “but I figured in West Texas it’s safe.”

Later when Lamb tried to pay for lunch, the waitress said the cowboys had taken care of his tab. I think they recognized one of their own.

Do the chrome-moly cowboys ever use their mounts to round up little doggies? Sure. On any given day in any major city in the United States, you’ll find police officers riding their mountain (mustang) mounts across their cement prairie, rounding up two-legged doggies. On their days off, they head for the country, just like any other chrome-moly cowboy.

Now when I speak of chrome-moly cowboys, I’m talking about riders of all ages, sizes, and of both sexes. One of the wonderful traits about the chrome-moly mount is that almost anyone can ride the range. Rory McCarthy, a paraplegic, cycled across the country last year and is now on a 12,000-mile ride around the world.⁵ Endurance can get you almost anywhere, either on an old horse or a chrome-moly horse. Louise Milner rode 1,200 miles in twenty-seven days through British Columbia, Washington, Idaho, and Montana to celebrate her 69th birthday.⁶

A nephew confessed what happened when his aunt mentioned that she’d like to do a bike ride of 80 miles on her 80th birthday:

Being the good nephew, I agreed to come along and watch out for her. We began at 6 A.M. and stopped for breakfast at the 16-mile mark. My aunt had packed our breakfast and lunch, including coffee, water and four beers, in her metal basket. We stopped again at the 32-mile mark and my aunt, seeing that I was a bit fatigued, suggested turning back. She also mentioned that she’d already taken the same 80-mile trip earlier in the week. Having gotten this close, I elected to move on. We reached the turnaround after three hours.

On the way back it began to rain and the wind gusted up to 35 mph. With twenty miles left I was

exhausted and fell behind for the rest of the ride.
The second half took us seven hard hours.

In the following weeks, while I was licking my wounds, my aunt took another 80-mile ride to a relative's 90th birthday.⁷

Increasingly, you will find people, like this nephew's aunt, riding the back roads and streets of Texas. Texas has the second largest number of bicycle riders (six million) in the United States. That's more bicycle riders in Texas than horseback riders in the United States. Last year Texans bought a half-million new bicycles. That's more new bicycles purchased than new cars.⁸

Now I'm going to give you another of those funny horse numbers. First, no one knows how many horses there are in Texas, much less how many horseback riders. The closest they can come is the approximately 450,000 quarter horses. From these numbers, you can arrive at your own total number of horses in Texas. Some people said 600,000. Others said a million.⁹ Take your pick.

We do know that some of the chrome-moly riders are like Johnnye Montgomery of Midland, Texas. When she retired last year, she rode the 2,700-mile perimeter of Texas in fifty-seven days. Not only that, she created her own routes. Other chrome-moly riders follow the 22,000 miles of bicycle routes already mapped. Two different routes run from coast to coast; two routes run north and south along both coasts; and the longest mountain bike route in the world, which reaches from Canada to Mexico along the Continental Divide, has just been completed.¹⁰

No matter which view of the cowboy you take, we Texans need never fear falling out-of-step with our Western heritage. Texas A&M University can now boast of an aerodynamics laboratory where they test this country's premiere chrome-moly riders. They use wind tunnels to test the latest in racing equipment. And they know which racing stances produce the least wind resistance.

"It strikes me," David Lamb says, "as remarkable that such a simple contraption carried me so far without extracting a single penny for fuel, oil or mechanical repairs. To most Americans, the

bicycle is no more than a toy, but as our city streets clog with traffic, it is worth noting that this affordable machine is still the prime source of transportation for the majority of the world's people and remains the most efficient means of self-propulsion ever invented."

If this were 1900, we might be saying that about the horse. I would venture that, fortunately, for us, we're talking about today's chrome-moly rider. Still, the chrome-moly cowboy, like the cowboy and explorer of yesteryear, is generally misunderstood and sometimes resented. Unlike yesterday's cowboy, however, the number of chrome-moly cowboys promises to grow. As the numbers grow, so will the lore and the hoped-for tolerance.

On any given day, but especially on a weekend, you will probably see a group of chrome-moly riders, or a lone rider, pedaling the back roads of Texas. If you listen carefully, as you pass in your automobile, you might hear, "Back in the saddle again, out where a friend is a friend. . . ."

ENDNOTES

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3. American Quarter Horse Association. Telephone interview. Amarillo, TX, 1995.
4. Mike Demmie. Adventure Cycling Association. Telephone interview. Missoula, Montana, 1995.
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7. *Bicycling*. 1995. 26.
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